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REMARKS

OF

HON. J. F. DOWDELL OF ALABAMA,

ON THE

ORGANIZATION OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES.

DELIVERED ON THE 8TH OF JANUARY, 1856.

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ORGANIZATION OF THE HOUSE.

Mr. PAINE, of North Carolina, submitted the following resolution, which he supported by a few remarks:

Resolved, That the Hon. WILLIAM B. SMITH, of Alabama, be chosen to preside as temporary chairman of this House until a Speaker be elected.

Mr. DOWDELL said: Before proceeding to give my vote, I desire to say a few words. I must confess, as an American citizen, representing in part a people who are sober, quiet, and conservative, who love their country—a religious community—I am exceedingly pained at the spectacle which has been presented to-night and for the last weeks by the American House of Representatives, in the middle of the nineteenth century. I am disposed to recur to the history of the past, preëminently before my mind—when Rome was burning, Nero was fiddling and dancing. To my mind, merriment is altogether out of place and ill-timed. Now, sir, while this House is indulging in this spectacle of amusement—and I speak kindly of it, for I suppose it is somewhat in the spirit of passing away an idle hour without the prospect of an organization soon—whilst in the midst of laughter, we are standing upon a slumbering volcano. Upon our borders, in the common territory of this country, our people are marshaling their forces to try the great question as to whether they are able to govern themselves—it may be with rifles in their hands. It becomes us to look, as patriots, seriously, soberly, these grave questions in the face. It becomes us to maintain that gravity due to the consideration of questions now being forced upon us, which involve the peace and happiness of our people and the permanence of our institutions. I have been reminded by the ludicrous scenes witnessed here, of a parallel to be found in a book entitled “Georgia Scenes,” which I read many years since. It was penned by Judge Longstreet, formerly of Georgia. Ned Brace, the hero of the story, happened in a city during the prevalence of a great fire—the flames in red volumes were rising higher and higher each moment—the people were running to and fro in great consternation—women

and children were screaming through the streets, and the midnight fire-bells were sending out their rapid and startling sounds, when Ned quietly took his position on the side-walk. About this time a large, old man, nearly out of breath, came running by in great haste, whose home was threatened with destruction perhaps, and was abruptly stopped by Ned with the interrogatory: “Sir, can you tell me where I can find Peleg Q. C. Stone?” “Damn Peleg Q. C. Stone! my house is on fire!” was the impatient reply. Now, sir, while the fire of civil war is threatening to be kindled upon our borders, whose flames once started may not be quenched until the temple of our liberties is burnt up, and the last hope of humanity for freedom is extinguished in the breast of man, questions are propounded here quite as impertinent at this time of danger, and calculated to provoke similar impatience, if not a similar reply.

Sir, those questions about the extension of the naturalization laws, and the “corrupting tendencies of the Roman Catholic church,” can be decided by our people, and we shall have a decision at the proper time; and I have no fear that any party in this country opposed to religious liberty, will ever be strong enough to control its legislation. I have no fear that the rights of our fellow-citizens, native or adopted, or of those who may hereafter emigrate to this country, will now be infringed, or that the people of this country will ever consent to be shackled by any party proposing to interfere with the rights of conscience, or suffer the avenues to citizenship, opened by the wisdom and generosity of our republican fathers to their oppressed and suffering neighbors across the ocean, to be blocked up. We have no fear of this—none at all; our apprehensions in this regard have been entirely removed, after witnessing the election results of the last few months. A proposition to that effect I understood to have been made by a small party—at least, whether so intended or not, the inference from the platform laid down was legitimate, and it embodied a selfish principle which would, in my humble

judgment, if carried out, wither the prosperity of this great and glorious American nation. Let us reflect for a moment. At an early period of our history—yes, sir, during our great Revolution which gave freedom to this continent, and the hope of it to the world—when we were weak, few in number, poor in purse, but of *large* and liberal *hearts*—when we were unable to cope with the nations of the earth without the aid of patriots from other lands, we threw open our doors, and invited *foreigners*—yes, sir, *foreigners*, to come in and partake with us the *perils* of defending our liberty. They generously responded to the invitation, and the portrait which there graces our walls [pointing to a portrait of La Fayette] will carry us back to the time when France sent out her volunteers to fight side by side with Americans for liberty; and the memory of that great man, united in our affections with that of the glorious Washington, will not be forgotten by a free and grateful people, but the glory of their joint deeds, common sufferings, and common struggles, will be transmitted to the remotest posterity. When we were weak we invited them in. They came; their bones whiten every battle field, and their heroic deeds illuminate every page of our history. The same hope which cheered the heart of the American soldier filled the breast of the Irish, the Scotch, the French, the German, the Pole. Yes, sir—all, all fought for, many died for the blessings of liberty to their children. Now, when we are strong—a powerful people, population large, and an overflowing treasury—fully able, without the aid of patriot foreigners, to take care of ourselves, a portion of us are disposed to say that they shall not come in and be citizens upon equal terms with us, on safe conditions. When we occupy broad and rich lands, capable, under the hand of industry, to yield food and clothing enough to furnish the millions of earth; when we have a population large enough, strong, intelligent and moral enough, to assimilate all who come under the natural law controlling emigration; when we know that they whose fathers fell by the side of our fathers, are now bound down to the earth under the iron heel of despotism, and who pant for this land of promise as the "hart panteth after the water brooks," I ask, shall this magnanimous Republic at once ignore its duty and its destiny by closing the door against those who knock so earnestly and entreatingly? Never, sir, by my consent. They are our brethren. This earth is God's earth, and he who taught us to love our neighbor will not forgive us if we do not. He who said, "Thou shalt not vex the stranger; thou shalt not oppress him in any wise; if you do, and he cry unto me, I will hear his cry, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives shall become widows and your children orphans," will not fail to avenge such wickedness. May we continue the wise policy under which we have, by the blessing of Providence, prospered so largely, avert the curses which we should so richly deserve for persecution and proscription, and make this nation what our fathers designed it—a blessing to mankind—a house of refuge for the oppressed—an asylum for the sufferers of earth!

[Here the hammer fell.]

Mr. DOWDELL. I wish to say, as there is a question pending, which was by my colleague's

vote laid over until to-morrow, that I am indisposed to allow a resolution upon the same basis to take precedence, and therefore I shall vote no.

Mr. ZOLLICOFFER offered the following resolution, and at the same time submitted the interrogatories which follow:

Resolved, That in conformity with the principles of a great popular Government, such as that of the United States, it is the duty of all candidates for political position frankly and fully to state their opinions upon important political questions involved in their election, and especially when they are not evoked by the body of electors whose votes they are seeking.

"I ask whether I am right in supposing that the gentleman from Illinois [Mr. RICHARDSON] regards the Kansas-Nebraska bill as promotive of the formation of free States in the Territories of Kansas and Nebraska?"

"Am I right in supposing he advocates the constitutionality of the Wilmot proviso; that in 1850 he opposed its application to the territories acquired from Mexico, only upon the ground that it was unnecessary, inasmuch as the Mexican local laws in those territories already abolished slavery—which ought to be sufficient for all Free-Soil men; and that he committed himself to the position that if territorial bills (silent upon the subject of slavery, and leaving the Mexican law to operate) were defeated, he would vote for bills with the Wilmot proviso in them?"

"Am I right in supposing that his theory is, that the Constitution of the United States does not carry slavery to, and protect it in, the Territories of the United States? That in the territory acquired from France, (including Kansas and Nebraska,) the Missouri restriction was necessary to make the territory free, because slavery existed there under France at the time of the acquisition, but that the Kansas and Nebraska bill, which repeals that restriction, but neither legislates slavery into those Territories nor excludes it therefrom, in his opinion, leaves those Territories without either local or constitutional law protecting slavery; and that therefore the Kansas and Nebraska bill promotes the formation of free States in Kansas and Nebraska?"

Mr. DOWDELL (on his name being called) said: Before recording my vote, I wish to make a remark, not however for the purpose of justifying the vote which I shall give—for I am astonished to find any gentleman opposed to the passage of the resolution—but to finish what I should have said when last on the floor, had not the time allotted me expired. Although I have no apprehension that any party in this country committed to proscription or persecution of individuals for religious opinions, or on account of the place of their birth, will, if the fact be known, ever control its legislation, yet I must confess that there is danger, if those who seek power are permitted to conceal opinions. In this country, where every individual is a sovereign—each an atom of that great aggregate mass whose united public opinion under constitutional limits makes and executes laws, I hold it to be the duty of each and all to communicate freely—to withhold nothing the one from the other—to conceal no opinion, principle, or position politically affecting the interests of the country. This I regard absolutely necessary, in order that every citizen may properly and under-

standingly discharge his duty. Why, sir, secrecy in regard to political tenets contradicts the fundamental idea of a Democratic Government. If, then, every citizen is entitled to know the political opinions of his neighbor, much more is he entitled to those opinions when they are to become his own through a Representative—when they are to find expression in laws enacted, and force in laws executed.

In voting for the pending resolution, I simply endorse what I esteem a sound principle—a safe practice. By the results of the questions to be propounded under it, I do not expect to be enlightened; but the country will have facts and opinions placed before it in a more authoritative form, coming from the candidates of the various parties in this House, than having to rely simply upon the declarations of respective friends. I do not see why any should oppose its adoption. The office of Speaker of the House is high and responsible. There are contingencies set forth in the Constitution, upon the happening of which it may become the highest post in the Government. Let opportunity be afforded for complete and full development—for questions to be asked and answered, until all are satisfied—the country satisfied. It is needless for me to repeat in word what I have expressed by more than a hundred votes—that I prefer for the speakership the gallant statesman from Illinois, [Mr. RICHMONDS.] It is not for the purpose of getting at his opinions that I wish to see the resolution passed. I know that he stands upon safe and sure ground. He is a national Democrat, willing to deal justly with all sections of the Union—according to both States and individuals their full constitutional rights. He stood upon the Kansas and Nebraska act—that great measure which asserted that the people ought to be allowed to govern themselves, subject only to the Constitution. Upon this principle the Democratic party have planted its standard, and under its folds all the conservatism and national men of the Union will rally; and upon this they will succeed and preserve the integrity of this great Republic.

Now, sir, I do not not but that each member may know the position of his own candidate; but, sir, I want the constituents, the people, to know the position of the candidates from the candidates themselves. I want the people to know clearly how all stand upon the great and leading question which will enter into the next elections, and decide, in my humble opinion, the destiny of this country. Sir, upon this great and leading question, the gentlemen composing what is called the Black Republican party, have taken position sectional in character, and aggressive towards the South. I want the lines clearly defined and drawn early, which divide parties, in order that the people of all sections, who are deeply interested in preserving this Government, may know with which to ally themselves—may know whether their influence is wielded to pull down or build up. As I have said before, I have but little fear of the Know Nothing party; not that I do not regard some of its principles odious, and its whole tendency dangerous, but, as in my judgment it attacks individual rights, appertaining to every citizen, North, East, South, and West, of course, sooner or later, it must go down; all will become interested in opposing its

principles, when made to understand that they are injurious to themselves. Not so with the Black Republican party. Sectional and fanatic, it is bent upon the destruction of the rights of a whole section. It threatens to do that which cannot be done without being followed by a speedy dissolution of these States. I make free to declare my opinion, not by way of threatening, but, I trust, as a patriot, who desires the best interests of his country, that if the gentlemen who are in a majority in this House fairly represent the section of the Union from which they come—if they are the types of northern majorities, and the principles which I understand them to profess shall become the settled opinions of controlling majorities in the northern States, and shall be attempted to be made law in this country, through the forms of Federal legislation, then the continued Union of these States will be an impossibility; or, if possible, the greatest curse which could be inflicted upon any people. I make no threats. I say what I most verily believe. I speak because I love the Union of the Constitution. I love it for its memories—for the hallowed recollections of the martyrs who died in the struggle to transmit its principles to us—for its present blessings, which I hope may be continued to the latest generation. Sir, I want the people to know who desires to preserve it—who pursues a course calculated to destroy it. I shall therefore vote not only for this resolution, but facilitate all inquiries after truth.

It matters not with me what may be the object of the resolution, or for what purpose the interrogatories are to be propounded after its adoption; nor shall I take exception because it originates with a party that commenced its career in *secrecy*, and thereby evinced a distrust of the soundness of its own principles by carefully avoiding all public discussion of them. Belonging, as I do, to a party whose creed is never written or spoken in an "unknown tongue"—(the first article of whose faith is, unwavering confidence in the intelligence, integrity, and patriotism of the masses; that it never shrinks from responsibility; that it avows opinions under any and all circumstances; that, in open day, in presence of friends and opponents, always marches square up to public opinion; the great arbiter between truth and error in a free country, and challenges investigation, and free scrutiny, and demands—ay, demands judgment upon the correctness of its propositions.)—it is not for me to object to the resolution; but rather to thank the gentleman for its introduction. It affords another opportunity for the exhibition of candor and fairness on the part of the Democrats; while at the same time it rebukes, with the keenest irony, the party from which it proceeds, whose earlier meetings were held not only known when or where; whose principles were nobody knew what; whose language of communication was signs and ciphers, and curiously cut bits of paper; whose name even, concealed from the outside world, has been dubbed "Know Nothing," after the uniform copy of its members to every inquiry made, and has thus perpetuated its refusal to come to the light, and whose very existence and all its principles, in the language of the gentleman from Georgia, [Mr. STEPHENS,] "were shrouded by an *oath*." It is a good indication, I trust, that the injunction of secrecy which has been gradually

dissolving under the steady light of a sound public opinion, will be entirely removed, and the little book of ceremonies, known as the Ritual of the Order, will, in due time, be given to the public, revised and corrected, if need be, with a free translation of the * * * which twinkle on its pages. When this shall have been done, we shall be better prepared for the answers of the respective candidates—to compare each with the creed of his party, and pass judgment accordingly.

Our candidate, I will repeat, stands upon safe ground. His record, of many years' service in this House during many of the most trying periods of our history, is before the country. His votes uniformly vindicate his nationality, and prove his devotion to the Constitution and the rights of the South under it. Whatever may be his opinions upon abstract questions, upon some of which we do doubtless differ, his acts are, nevertheless, satisfactory to me and my people, and, we believe, promotive of the best interests of the whole country. This decides my preference, and I yield him my hearty support.

I will not now enter upon a discussion of the principles involved in the interrogatories propounded by the gentleman from Tennessee. [Mr. ZOLLICOFFER.] Whatever may be the opinions of those who voted for the Kansas and Nebraska act, will not now affect the operation of the law itself. Under it a government has been organized, and, for the exercise of its powers within the limitations of the Constitution of the United States, will be responsible only to the people to be affected by them. It is enough for me to know, in this crisis, whether a man is loyal to the great principle contained in that act—whether he is willing to abide by it as a settlement, a final settlement, of the slavery question, and is willing that it shall be applied in the organization of all future territorial governments, and thus assist in removing the discussion from these Halls, and transferring the exercise of the powers of government to the people, to whom the exercise of it, under our theory of government, properly belongs, and whose welfare is most deeply involved in the results.

Now, sir, the people will doubtless inquire, why all national men who hold to the doctrine of non-intervention by Congress on the subject of slavery in the Territories, cannot unite in the support of the gentleman from Illinois, whose illustrious service in behalf of this measure during the last Congress contributed so much to its success? I shall not pretend to answer for others; I only speak for myself, and I am proud, as a southern man, that opportunity is afforded me to cast my vote for Mr. RICHARDSON, and by doing so to testify to him, and his noble compeers who stood by us in the conflict, and, with a moral courage worthy of the best days of the Republic, battled against the prejudices of their own section, and restored to my people their rights under the Constitution, my lasting gratitude and high appreciation of their patriotism. They deserve well of the whole country, and, though temporarily condemned by the thoughtless and fanatical, yet that purified and chastened public opinion which flows from the "sober second thought" of the American people will amply reward them in its judgment for their action, and vindicate, along with the peaceful fruits of its operation,

the wisdom of the law which they assisted to enact. An infraction of the Constitution has been healed, a loss to the rights of the States has been restored, and a stigma upon the institutions of the South has been removed by the repeal of the Missouri restriction.

Our equal right to occupy and enjoy the common territory is no longer denied by unjust legislation. For this victory we are indebted to the national Democrats of the North. Many fell in the struggle which achieved it, but they will rise again, for around them are gathered the sympathies of a grateful people, and they will stand forth the acknowledged champions of truth, when those who now fill their places will pass quietly away into oblivion. Whilst almost the entire South acknowledges the obligation of gratitude to the national men of the North, it is to be deeply regretted that the policy of a new party in our midst prevents its expression at this critical juncture. I do not contend that our united vote would elect a Speaker, but none are blind enough not to see that our divisions materially weaken our common cause. Our enemy, and the enemy to the Constitution, although divided upon numberless subordinate questions, are, nevertheless, united and compacted in their aggressions upon our rights. They, too, dispute about Catholics and foreigners, and are "at enmity between themselves;" but, like Pilate and Herod, are made friends when the rights of the South are to be destroyed.

Whence came our dissensions? It seems that this new order was manufactured by Yankee ingenuity expressly for the occasion, and thrown, if I may so express it, into the South to divide our forces at the very time the heaviest assault was to be made upon us. How far they have succeeded the country must judge. The Black Republican party moves in solid column, animated by one feeling—hatred to the South and all the friends of the South. They have commenced their attacks upon our northern allies. Are we unitedly rushing to the rescue? Why are they so determined on the defeat of RICHARDSON? Because he is a Democrat? Not so, for they number many who were formerly Democrats among them. They do it because he led the forces that repealed the Missouri restriction, and now, like a true man, stands up and vindicates the justice and righteousness of that action. For the same reason they are endeavoring to strike down the present Administration. Because our patriotic President refuses to bow to their fanatic demands, and join the crusade against southern institutions; because, like an old Roman, he stands firmly by the Constitution of his country, guarding the rights of all sections, he, too, is denounced, and must be victimized to satisfy the insatiable appetite of this Black Republican faction. Will a single southern man assist in the sacrifice? God forbid! For his uniform and steadfast devotion to sound principles during his whole administration, and for the noble sentiments and unanswerable arguments which characterize his late message in behalf of the rights of the States, he deserves the thanks of every lover of his country. The conservative masses of our countrymen, North and South, will rally around him, for the great cause which he espouses belongs alike to us all.

For the continued disorganization of this House, I shall leave the country to locate the responsibility. Nothing but a most fearful sectional controversy has brought this confusion upon us. That such is the fact I deeply deplore, but do not regret its manifestation. The discovery of the seat of the disease will enable us to find a remedy. The constitution of the body-politic, I trust, is strong enough to survive the attack. Far better that the present Congress should utterly fail to organize, than even the semblance of victory should be given to Black Republicanism by the success of its champion. Should the whole matter, by the failure of organization, be referred again to the people, I have strong confidence that a representation would be returned here national and conservative, prepared to do full justice to all sections, and willing to abide the compromises of the Constitution in letter and spirit. Acting upon this conviction, for one, I shall continue to hold the position which I have taken to the end of the chapter.

During the debate which followed the passage of the resolution,

Mr. RICHARDSON made the following remarks: Mr. Clerk, the gentleman from Tennessee seems to misunderstand the remarks which I made on last Saturday; and I desire to say to the gentleman only this: in 1850, when I submitted the remarks to which he refers, and while I discussed the position assumed by various gentlemen on this floor, I then stated that it was the duty of Congress to pass laws in reference to this question, and to let the people decide, when they came to frame their constitution, what their do-

mestic institutions should be. I endeavored to bring them to the point by showing what their positions respectively were.

I will say to the gentleman, further—for I do not desire that my position on this question shall be misunderstood either here or elsewhere—that I stated then, and I state now, that any remark which I may have made then, or at any other time, that I was willing to vote for the Wilmot proviso, or anything else which was not a fair, just, and equitable adjustment of all these questions between the States and the people of the States, was made with a view to bring the friends of the Administration to a particular point. In the remarks made in 1850, and to which he refers, I there stated that my object was to bring the Administration of General Taylor to the test, to see whether his northern or southern supporters had been deceived. It was not for any other reason. I stated, on Saturday last, that I had not acted in accordance with these declarations, and that, if I had, I should have committed a wrong and unjust act. When the bills of 1850, which recognize the same principle as the Nebraska-Kansas act, were passed, I took my position on the ground which I now occupy.

I want to say another thing. I am one of those who change my opinions when I think that they are wrong ones. I disavow any sentiment which I have uttered when I think that it is wrong. I said, the other day, that while I believe, according to the letter of the Constitution, we had a right to exclude slavery, yet, at the same time, as it was unjust and wrong, I say, in my opinion, it violated the spirit of the Constitution; for that Constitution was made to secure equality among all the States and the citizens of the Union.

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